

ESCAPE TO THE WILD

A Family's Return to Simplicity

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IT WAS A SUNNY DAY.

I don't think you know the true meaning of sunshine until you've tried to live outdoors.

Outside. In the sun.

On sunny days the world will sing you lullabies, and everything will glitter, glitter like gold or rainbows or sparkling water or silver rings or amber or springtime leaves. The river will be your artery, the blood will flow, the wind will carry you and dry your tears, for real. All of the scents awaken your forgotten memories, the soul is healed, and the gods love you.

On sunny days. In nature. Outside.



Just not that day.

That day, the sun was reflected on the screen, and I had to squint hard to type. And that wasn't all. It was worse. I had to stretch my body in an awkward position, uncomfortable, completely still, one arm reaching far up into the air, computer in my hand.

I tried to catch the Internet signal. I tried to upload. I wrote:

What happens when a modern family leaves modern society and moves into the wild? (To live a more free and simple life, I wanted to add, but I didn't. Perhaps a premonition.)

There are advantages to starting a blog. For instance, if you are lost, starting a blog will help you create a coherent narrative until it all makes sense again, and when it makes sense again you will be less lost. It's a lifesaver.

There are certain disadvantages too, absolutely. People might hate you; they might tell you that you are a bad mother, a bad person, a bad citizen, a bad storyteller. There are all kinds of things people will say when they don't have to say them to your face: you give them too little, you give them too much. Better to hide. Lie still. Play dead. Be quiet. For people are dangerous. Dangerous predators. I would much rather not have anything to do with them, so I don't know why I was standing there, really. I don't know if the pros truly outweigh the cons.

In an attempt to convince myself, I began to talk.

"Me, myself," I said. "I have something to say, and it's important that it's being said." I went on and on: "You have to risk something; you have to throw yourself into the arena, face the lions, fight! Be brave. Don't be lost."



You can run into the forest to hide. Many people do, more than you think, but that's not why we did it. We ran into the forest to find ourselves. To find each other and the meaning of life. Deeper. Deeper. More.

It wasn't that I expected a gentle hug, or dancing around in fields of flowers. I knew it would be tough in the wild; I knew we would feel alienated and that nature wouldn't feel natural at all—but I wasn't prepared for this: standing on a rock, sun in my eyes, arm stretched far into the air, as though I could reach the sky and touch it. Like an idiot.

Then came the eagle.

I heard its long howls, and they awoke—they always awake—an odd, longing feeling in me. High above the valley it flew. I followed it with my eyes.

Around me, on the ground, lay enormous fallen trees. Overpowered by storms, they just lay there. Their roots, tortuous and tangled in with rocks, looked like the shadows of trolls.

The trolls were looking at me, me in the arena; I could feel their eyes piercing my neck. “What are you doing here?” they whispered.

The sun was heating the rock, and the sweet smells of the forest floor—moss, windflower, lingonberry, elk tracks, spring water and decaying leaves—didn’t really soothe me. The Internet soothed me. Society soothed me. I knew it. I knew the rules. I knew the language. It was just that I could barely see it, all the stuff I knew so well—because of that damn sunlight.

Blah blah blah. The sound of the keyboard as I typed my words. *Click. Click. Click.* It sounded like a single chicken feather turning into a thousand chatting parrots, and there you have it: the sound of structure.

This is how it is. This is how we were. This is what we did.

I wrote about how we felt before. How we felt as if we had lost control and ownership of our own lives, how the freedom to choose had simply vanished. We had not chosen it to be like it was; it had just happened, unconscious choices, coincidences.

The nagging discomfort. It wasn’t what we wanted, back when we were young. The unspoken feeling of having betrayed your children. So helpless they would be, if all the systems collapsed—the financial, the social, the climate. If society collapsed, how would they manage?

This ever-growing sense that something was wrong, really wrong, that something was coming—if not Judgement Day, then at least an unsettling sensation of watching the world as we knew it crumble before our eyes.

I looked up.

My gaze wandered across the valley. Even if the valley wasn’t quite as exotic as the first time I had laid eyes on it, it was still foreign. A foreign valley.

On my left were the waterfall and the big rocks that the river so crudely passed, like a camel through a needle's eye.

The children liked to go to the waterfall. We imagined that when summer came, we would sit there in the little pools, and it would feel like we were soaking up the sun while sitting in a jacuzzi. Like rich people.

The dark spruce forest to the left was so impenetrable, but if you walked alongside the river, the forest would open up, so gently.

At the other end of the valley, on my right, was the lake. Very. Blue. Lake. The river's mouth was a dangerous place, with big holes in the floating grass and a deep swamp, but a small path led through, and you could easily keep your feet dry on your way down to bathe or to fish. Just pass the fallen tree trunk and walk out on the islet with the three birches, take a big leap, and there you were. A nice little spot with a sandy beach. I knew exactly how cold the water would feel on my bare toes. My gaze wandered back, along the river, past the beaver dam, until it landed in the middle. That's where we lived. We lived in the middle.

A small gravel road wound its way down the mountain, down to the river, ending in a roundabout. From the roundabout there was a small path down to a bridge. Across the bridge, up to the campsite, up to the cabin and there—that was it. That was where we lived. This was who we were.

An old *säterstuga*, a tiny cabin, 172 square feet. In the old days, farmers would take their cows to graze in the forest during the summertime, and they would grow crops on the fertile soil closer to their farmhouses while the girl (always the girl) would live with the animals in the forest, making cheese, butter and cream. Each week a boy from the farm would go visit her to fetch the milk and give her bread. It was a whole system, and these *säterstugas* were still spread out in the forest like lonely mushrooms. Some were more worn down by time than others.

We only lived there temporarily. We wanted to build our own cabin; we had all sorts of plans for our own cabin, but we hadn't

started to really build it yet. Getting started seemed so insurmountable, so irrevocable. We were still busy landing. As though our souls came flying, slowly, behind us.

This *säterstuga* was called “Svensäter.” People had written their names on the old beams, both inside and outside. From the war. From the eighties. The oldest mark was from 1852, neatly chiselled inside the small ventilation hole in the storeroom, but there was also a rune on the south side, exactly where the morning sun hit the cabin first. *Fehu*. Old Norse code: an alphabet that looks like sticks scattered on the ground, but they have magical meanings, the runes. *Fehu* means cattle, means wealth, means possession, means success in your endeavours, means luck. A sign of hope and plenty. But, typically Scandinavian, it is also a sign of loss, failure, cowardice and burnout. Because you can’t have one without the other.

In front of the cabin, we had built a big tipi of thin, branchless trees, strung a giant grey tarpaulin around it, made a fireplace inside and tossed some of our pillows, mattresses and blankets in there. The tipi was our kitchen, living space, hangout area; we only slept in Svensäter.

Svensäter had a fireplace, a window and a door, and it was divided into two rooms: a cold room to the north (actually more like a pantry) and a warmer one to the south. Upstairs there was an unused room with a low ceiling.

The children slept in the north room, where a friendly soul had built a couple of bunk beds many years ago. Jeppe and I slept in the living room on two thin mattresses.

I watched them wandering about down there.

Jeppe was building a woodshed. His first building. The woodshed looked like a Soweto shed, some laths, some roofing sheets. Sigurd crawled around his legs.

I saw Silas standing on the slope toward the river, cutting down small trees with the axe we had given him for his birthday a couple of weeks ago. I saw Sebastian and Victoria walking in and

out of the dark forest, carrying heavy black buckets of soil and elk shit. The Captain walked around raking twigs and leaves into little piles. The small trees Silas was cutting down were going to be used as edges for our seedbed, the piles of twigs would be used as ground material, and the soil the twins had gathered would be poured on top. This was a composting project. This would soon be our seedbed.

The woodshed and the seedbed were our first projects: to dry the firewood, to plant the seeds. Much to our surprise and due to our naive approach, we had soon realized that you can't just throw seeds on the ground and hope for the best. No, the soil in the forest is acidified and filled with cliffs, rocks and sand. It was the Captain, this stranger, who had taught us the principle behind *hugelkultur* or *täckodling*, as he called it. "This is how you grow crops in the forest," he said, and everything he said, he said with conviction and experience.

It was a good thing he was there, I thought to myself, as I sat there on my Internet rock, watching them. Like hardworking ants, they marched to the drumbeat of family:

"Your bucket is only half full," one of them yelled.

"Your bucket is only half empty," the other one yelled back. I squinted and bent over the computer. This is what I wrote:

I can write about this; of course I can!

I can write about how we quit our jobs, tossed all of our stuff in the landfill, took the kids out of school, and jumped into the car.

We just drove away. Yippie-kay-yay, mothafuckas.

It was rock 'n' roll. It was Bonnie and Clyde. But we were completely silent in the car; we were terrified as we followed the highway to where the highway ends. In the ocean.

We threw ourselves in the ocean.

On the ferry, we stayed close to the playroom. We sat on the big pillows and looked at the others; we knew that we were no longer like them. We weren't on a holiday. We were

fugitives, we were emigrants, we sailed on the freedom ferry away from poverty, war, and submission—of the mind, yes, but no less dangerous. Dangerous. It's dangerous to lose your own power. And honour.

Jeppe had forgotten our wallet on the roof of the car at the place we stopped for coffee. Our wallet was now in a ditch somewhere, just like all of our artifacts at the junkyard. We had no papers, no money, no identification. We were stripped of value. The outer circumstances finally matched the inner—but our gypsy kids didn't cry as the motherland disappeared on the horizon, as the gambling machines blinked and the passengers shouted at each other.

This was exciting, you see. It was an adventure. Can we do this? Is this even allowed? These sentences repeated themselves nonstop in my head as I ate the last chocolate. They still do.

I can tell you all about how we settled in the forest; I can tell you all about the skills we acquired. I can tell you about the solidarity we felt, and how the wolves howled at night. I can tell you about happy swims in the lake, spruce syrup and rewilding. Permaculture, natural building, bushcraft, survivalism, off-grid living, and the real, tangible need to find another way of realizing the human potential, an alternative. We were pioneers. Only we didn't really invade someone else's country; we invaded our own.

I can easily tell you that it's the best thing we've ever done.

I can tell you about how we live without electricity, how we fetch water in the river, how we wash our clothes ourselves, make our food ourselves, chop our firewood ourselves, establish ourselves, change ourselves. Us. Ourselves.

I can tell you how it was before.

Hurry up, hurry up, quality time in the car, work, pick up kids, make dinner, television. Not to mention all of the disasters, and all of the wars, the never-ending series

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of scandals, the desperate people, how everybody had to pretend as if everything was normal, how our culture imploded, how all of the structures we used to believe in had been hollowed out, empty, about to fall.

All of the things we had taken for granted. The things we believed in. Our ancestors fought for these structures, died for them, and here we are with the ironic distance, kissing apathy's cheek, acting as though we are not drowning within ourselves.

Do you know how it feels? Do you know that broken heart?

I can tell you about how we would lie on the pillows and how he would whisper: "It's the biggest betrayal in the world to have had a realization and then not act on it." Pause. He continued. "It's kind of like you die inside. You know something is wrong; you just know it, but you can't...you don't...it eats you up."

"I'd like to do something, too," I said. "It's just...what do we do, where do we go from here?"

He whispered, "I think this situation is the most dangerous thing in the world." And then we just did something, we did, and I can tell you about it; of course I can!

I can tell you about our great escape and our pursuit of happiness. I can tell you about our pioneer life. I can describe our daily life in the deep, dark woods. I can tell you, over and over, that you have the right to your own life, and that nobody has the right to take it away from you. I can tell you all of it. I can!

I think I lied.

I think I tried to play it cool, because of course I couldn't write about it. I could barely remember the last couple of months; they were as foggy and nonexistent in my mind as our valley was on the coverage charts of the telephone company.

This was life under the radar. We were out of reach. All I had were these stretched arms between us, our life, and the world as I knew it.

I closed my computer, got up and stood there as an antenna for a little while.

My Internet spot was well-known to me by now. The old gnarled pine tree, the big rock almost staggering on the edge of the mountain. I felt safe on that rock. I knew there was coverage there. I existed there. Reality was there.

Everything else seemed as if a dream. *Can we do this? Is this even allowed?*

There they were again, those questions. I know I kept on questioning myself as I crawled down the mountain, down to my flock, down to the forest garden, down to the tipi, down to my cabin and the porridge. I had to hurry; the sun had already passed the lake, which meant that we would soon be hungry. The red pot, hanging over the fireplace, called to me, like a church bell swinging back and forth.